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# On the Social Evolution of Power To/Over

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## Abstract:

The distinction between 'power to' and 'power over', and the conceptualisation of their relationship, is highly relevant to an understanding of social evolution. They are in fact causally and historically interdependent. I claim that major social transformations such as the neolithic and industrial 'revolutions' need to be understood in this light, as does the heightening of formalised competition in contemporary liberal society. I consider the current literature on social evolution critically, and make a case for applying some of its ideas to the long-term general history of human society. The entire argument is framed within a concern to develop a more pragmatic understanding of power, aware of problems arising from an Enlightenment-derived distrust of 'power over'.

**Keywords:** power to/over; social evolution; historical sociology; liberal society; competition

*As people band together, and co-operate to achieve their goals, each comes to have more control over his own life: his power is increased with the help of others. But, simultaneously, other people start having some control over*

*him. This process can lead to the alternative horror with which to contrast an ideal, autonomous life: that in which one is enslaved—Peter Morris (2002: 40)*

*Subjection enters the house with the plough—attributed to the Prophet Mohammed (also the epigraph for Ernest Gellner's *Plough, Sword and Book*).*

## **Introduction**

Our way of talking and thinking about power is inherited from the age of Enlightenment and revolutions. In that dawn of modern nations, deep patterns were laid down, in which the power of some people over others, traditionally embodied in aristocratic hierarchies, was challenged and rejected by reconfigured 'peoples'. At the same time aspirations to a world in which our natural individual powers were unshackled and fully realised, a world of 'natural liberty', was articulated, informing a range of ideologies that would follow, from liberalism to Marxism. But that is not the world that age has delivered us into. Instead traditional hierarchies were replaced by new ones, based on success in a new range of bureaucracies and stratified networks. The hard lesson here is that social hierarchy of some form is a fixture of complex, large-scale society: we may choose how we do it, but not whether we do it. Our theories and language of power has had trouble accepting this state of affairs, and continues to want to neatly separate 'power over' as a social problem, from 'power to' as a positive natural endowment. We are much more comfortable critiquing power than we

are matter-of-factly describing it.<sup>i</sup> This article does not reject this analytic distinction, but argues that ultimately we must understand power as hierarchy, and power as capability, as causally interdependent aspects of the same social and historical process. Power in human society evolves, and we need to understand how it evolves in order to understand its nature. I proceed by first discussing the to/over distinction in the study of power, then by addressing current theories of social evolution, and finally by bringing these together in a broad sketch of the social evolution of power to/over in human history, and its current form in liberal societies.

### **Power To/Over**

We can identify analytic, normative, and processual issues in the decision to draw a distinction between power-to and power-over<sup>ii</sup>. Analytically it allows us to distinguish between the sheer capacity of agents to achieve ends, and the social relationships in which some agents can determine the actions of others. For some purposes it makes sense to demarcate these meanings of power. If we are particularly interested in how, and under what circumstances, some gain power over others, the fact that this implicitly involves some sort of power-to can be held as constant and taken for granted. The debates about power's definition that run from Dahl (1957) up to Lukes (1974), with their various assertions about 'A's imposing their wills on 'B's, all took this as a basic assumption. They were largely concerned about power relations between individuals, groups, and classes. On the other side, those such as Parsons (2002[1963]) and Arendt (1969) who stressed the power-to concept were more concerned with the legitimation of the aggregate, systemic power of the modern

democratic state. What I want to highlight here is the generally synchronic nature and functionalism of these analyses, concerned with how to define power-over or power-to in principle, in the abstract, in ways that can generally be applied to all cases. As they serve different analytic purposes, there was a tendency to develop these two conceptions of power as alternatives, and sometimes as rival conceptions. But this is only tenable in this decomposed and timeless analytic frame.

We also make this distinction for normative reasons. As Morriss (2002: 36-46) has argued, we need a concept of power-to in order to assign responsibility for actions: one can't be blamed if one didn't have the capacity to do it, or not do it. And we also evaluate larger systems and distributions of power, in terms of how they both achieve power-to for their members, and manage power-over among them. More generally, as I've already suggested, we tend, as creatures of modern liberal societies to normatively resist the idea of power-over, or require its special justification (e.g., as necessary for child rearing). Power-over as such is permanently suspect and in need of qualification and legitimation. Power-to is aligned with ideas of 'empowerment', and enjoys an automatic positive glow (even though one can be empowered to do harm!). Thus democratic theory as a whole, in addition to offering practical suggestions for the management of power, tends to take the form of a normative argument supporting a certain degree and arrangement of trade-off, of accepting power-over in exchange for enhancing power-to. This makes good sense, but once again it also tends to get done in a rather abstracted theoretical space in which democracy is modeled and

evaluated (e.g. Held 1987; Pettit 1997). It usually leaves aside the thornier historical problems of why power-to and power-over evolve together.

So, we also need to make this distinction for reasons of processual analysis. To understand how power relations change and develop over time, it is useful to be able both to distinguish power as capacity versus as hierarchy, and also to be able to argue why and how these aspects interact in a dynamic way. The notion of a trade-off between the two, just introduced in regard to democratic theory, turns out not to be specific to democracy, but more general for the history of human society. It is just that with the democratic era the idea, or problem, comes out into the open, in plainer view as it were. My general definition of social power would be: the capacity of agents, broadly defined, to achieve intended and foreseen effects. These effects can be on other agents, or the world more generally (Hearn 2012: 16; indebted to Wrong 2002: 21). I am in agreement with Morriss (2002) that we best understand the meaning of the word and concept 'power' (as with all language) when we inquire about its utility—how is it used. We normally use the word power to identify the capacity for action of things (cars) and persons (agents) with a concern for understanding wider causal effects and potentialities. The -to and -over dimensions are built into the very purposes of the concept. Because it in some ways encapsulates the whole argument let me connect this point about the meaning of power to the role of language as a whole. Humans, as a species of life, developed the capacity for language because it gave them the ability to more precisely know and control their environment. The ability to abstract from and map reality through language brings with it a greater capacity to analyse, calculate and predict. And

this in turn has bestowed on humans greater control over an array of environments. At the same time, language also enables much wider and more subtle communication between members of the group, allowing them to coordinate their actions in much more complex ways. This too enhances the power of the group and its members. In short, language gave humans an adaptive advantage. This has been central to the expansion of human domain over other living creatures and the planet. The evolution of language itself is a primary case in point of the interdependence of power-to and power-over.

### **Social Evolution**

As the foregoing suggests, I contend that an important context for developing our thinking about power to/over as history, as process, is that of social evolutionary theory. My position is midway between standard views in comparative historical sociology, which I think can afford to draw more on evolutionary concepts, and current theories of social evolution, which I think need to work harder to speak to the comparative historical tradition, and tend to over-extend analogies to evolution in the biological sphere. What I have to say is unlikely to satisfy either side, but perhaps can provoke dialogue.

As a baseline, before examining the literature, I offer my own minimal definition. By 'social evolution' I mean change due to selection and adaptation among varied social forms under conditions of competition within social environments. The term 'social forms' here is deliberately highly general, covering organizations, institutions, conventions, ideas, ideologies, technologies, and so on<sup>iii</sup>. Social forms are maintained, altered, and eliminated through human use and disuse, but they do not 'reproduce' themselves. The distinction between 'social forms'

and ‘environments’ is heuristic, because any social environment is made up of other social forms, any of which may be evolving in relation to those affecting it. And, while myriad social forms aggregate into what we loosely call ‘societies’, whether societies as a whole evolve (see Parsons 1977, Nolan and Lenski 2006) is a difficult question, and one left aside by the focus on social forms, which do not respect putative societal boundaries.

Three fundamental issues in the social evolution literature should be addressed before proceeding. First, there is wide agreement in the literature that social evolution does not depend on any idea of progress, improvement or human betterment (see Blute 2010: 3-7). Darwin was cautious and ambiguous on this point, but he did not see his theory as in any simple and direct way implying social progress, despite the widespread nineteenth-century tendency to bend the idea to this purpose (Lewins 2007: 249-58; Ruse 1997). And current theories of biological evolution have predominantly abandoned any such notion (Futuyma 2013: 304), so there is no logical reason why it should be attached to a theory of social evolution, which would be hindered in its analytic capacity by such confusion<sup>iv</sup>. Second, although there are fields—sociobiology (Alexander 1974), evolutionary psychology (Buss 1999)—that look for the biological and genetic roots of human behaviour, and the emerging field of ‘coevolution’ that concerns itself more with the mutually shaping effects of gene-culture interaction (Durham 1991; Richerson and Boyd 2005: ch 6) those are not my concern here. Thirdly, a basic theoretical question is whether the relationship between evolutionary concepts and theories in the biological and social spheres is one of analogy—using analogies from the biological to help understand the social—or



one of both areas of theory reflecting a common underlying theory of change and causation (Blute 2010: 11). Hodgson and Knudsen (2010: ch 2 and *passim*) are adamant that the latter is the case, and argue convincingly that attempts to draw exhaustive analogies between the two domains will be problematic due to fundamental differences between biology and culture. I agree with this point, but am agnostic about the thesis of a higher order conceptual unity. However, in my view one can argue for the utility of judiciously chosen analogies, while allowing that it may eventually be shown that the utility of analogy is in fact due to shared derivation from underlying logical principles.

Having said this, I think one particularly influential attempt at analogy has been unhelpful. The primary culprit here is Richard Dawkins' (1989, orig. 1976) concept of the 'meme', roughly a unit of heritable cultural information. This has been picked up across several disciplines, including psychology (Blackmore 1999), philosophy (Dennett 1995) and sociology (Runciman 2009)<sup>v</sup>. The assumption seems to be that the gene is the basic building block of evolutionary theory, and thus without something corresponding to it social evolutionary theory is weakened. But this is clearly wrong. Darwin's theory of evolution was lucidly and compellingly articulated without a theory of genetics, which came much later. Be this as it may, the current tendency among scholars working in this area has been to distance themselves from this concept, acknowledging the difficulties arising from the facile analogy to genes with their relatively clear and particulate natures (e.g. Mesoudi 2011: 41-43). The main tendency has been to replace the meme concept with emphasis on the importance of 'cultural transmission' (Mesoudi 2011: 58-62) and/or 'social learning' (Blute 2010;

Richerson and Boyd 2005). In effect, the processes of reproduction and inheritance are identified less narrowly with the hypothetical 'unit of information' that is passed on, and more with the relationship of transfer between 'demonstrators' and 'learners'. This also tends to be seen as a way of making a clear case for 'cultural evolution' because one of the most standard and minimal definitions of culture, in anthropology at least, is 'that which is learned' (cf. Blute 2010: 30-31; Richerson and Boyd 2005: 5)<sup>vi</sup>.

This emphasis on cultural transmission and social learning is preferable to the meme concept, but it also raises problems. First of all, the meme-idea tends to haunt this approach, because that which is 'learned' is still generally conceived as some kind of unit of knowledge or 'information' that is transferred between minds. Shifting attention to the 'act of replication' does not entirely resolve problems with the misleadingly particulate conception of the unit transferred. Secondly, because culture is understood ultimately as information that is transferred from mind to mind, much as genes are transferred from body to body, there is a misleading individualism involved here. Mesoudi, for instance, bemoans the 'reluctance to reduce cultural phenomena to individual psychological processes' (2011: 52), believing that such reduction is necessary for adequate explanation. I accept that cultural, psychological and even biological processes are mutually involved to some degree. There is no purely autonomous realm of the 'superorganic' (Kroeber 1917; Sapir 1917) for untainted cultural analysis. But this perspective fails to recognise the ways knowledge and dispositions are sustained directly through the shaping influence of organisations, institutions, social networks and artefacts, as such, without any

particular, necessary route through individual minds themselves (cf. Douglas 1986; Tilly 1984: 26-33; Wuthnow 1987: ch 6). I question the assumption that cultural change can only be explained through discreet moments of 'reproduction', of copying. It is not that social learning isn't important, simply that it doesn't encompass the mechanisms by which human knowledge and behaviour is sustained and altered. Finally, the illustrations we use tend to confirm the biases in our concepts. This perspective lends itself especially to being illustrated by examples from technology and artefacts, where 'ideas' are very clearly materially encoded in various 'generations' of the object in question (e.g. flint projectile points, steam engines, texts). I have no disagreement with the application of evolutionary concepts and phylogenetic analysis to these areas. But much of what we want to understand in terms of systemic social change involves social forms that are more complex and less easily objectified, and do not easily lend themselves to a paradigm of descending generations.

Corresponding to these objections is the minimal presence of concepts of social organisation (formal and informal) in many of the key texts in this literature (e.g. in: Blute 2010, Mesoudi 2011, Richerson and Boyd 2005, Runciman 2009). My own interest in this area derives from the earlier anthropological tradition of cultural ecology and long-term political evolution (Steward 1972; Service 1975; Fried 1967), in which questions of social organisation both at the encompassing level of types of societal organisation ('bands, tribes, chiefdoms, states'), and the embedded level of key organisations that develop within that larger context (military units, religious sects, guilds, secret societies, economic firms, and so on *ad infinitum*), are primary components in the analysis of social change. I find it

odd that these are not given a larger place in attempts to construct a general theory of social evolution. The notable exception to this is Hodgson and Knudsen (2010, esp. ch 7), and this is likely due to the fact that they work in the fields of business studies and organisational design, respectively. They recognise the importance of organisational form for social change, and the applicability of evolutionary concepts to that domain. Using the illustrative case of the development of economic firms, they observe that these don't simply reproduce themselves, but also merge, takeover, and spin-off, thus confronting the complexities of organisational evolution.

Their approach is built around a key distinction between 'replicators' and 'interactors' (made by Hull 2001: ch 1). In biology the paradigmatic replicators are genes, and the paradigmatic interactors are organisms (or, at higher a level, species). To transfer this analytic logic to human social organisations they speak of 'routines' and organisational 'positions' (or 'roles', a term I find easier here but they reserve for another purpose) as the corresponding replicators, whose survival and reproduction depends on the survival of the carrying organisation (interactor). This helps get them away from the 'ghost of the meme', routines and roles being somewhat less like units of transferable information, and closer to what are often called 'practices'. I think this is an improvement, although I am still not certain it doesn't over-abstract from what actually sustains diverse forms of social organisation. Granted there are routines and roles, and also ideas and bodies of knowledge. But there are also sentiments, ties of affect, networks, implicit conventions, and much more, all of which, in complex interaction with the other 'replicators' usually highlighted, contribute to whether organisations

thrive, survive, or fail. All this is simply to say that, across this literature, the theorisation of 'replicators' strikes me as unfinished and still a bit premature. Moreover, while I think it is perfectly legitimate to try to develop such generalised concepts, I am not convinced it is immediately necessary in order to continue to develop a theory of organisational evolution, especially as applied to major organisational forms. I return to the key point: Darwin developed a compelling theory of evolution in the absence of a well-understood 'replicating' mechanism (the gene). I doubt whether there is any single corresponding concept in the realm of social evolution, and see no logical reason why there should be. Finally, all this is pertinent to the present argument, because the idea that power-to expands with power-over is, in effect, a statement about the nature of social organisation and why it is so highly elaborated in humans. Yes, we are increasingly empowered by our technologies and capacity to learn, but social organisation, the complex division of labour, is in my view equally, if not more important.

A key issue in all of this is the idea of 'levels of selection'. In biological evolution there are debates about what is most important, but also consensus that there can be selection processes that operate at different levels—on genes, on organisms, on groups/populations, and on species as a whole (Futuyma 2013: 292-5). In Dawkins' (1989) 'selfish gene' approach there is a tendency to prioritise the gene, to suggest that an organism, and all higher levels of biological organisation, are simply the means for genes to reproduce themselves. This assumption carries through to the rather looser conception of memes (cf. Blackmore 1999). Despite the shift from 'memes' to 'social learning' much of the

literature on sociocultural evolution seems similarly preoccupied with the differential capacity of ‘replicators’ (habits, customs, roles, routines, tools, languages, ideas, and so on) to replicate, and less interested in the organisational forms through which they must replicate, and which are themselves the object of selection. This is not to say that this ‘replicator-focus’ is illegitimate, and it is understandable that it might be especially relevant to certain kinds of research such as the histories of science and technology. But there seems in many quarters to be a strange lack of interest in the dynamics and processes of competitive selection specific to the various kinds of social organisation—families, households, firms, voluntary associations, political parties, religious sects, states, and so on—that are the ordinary foci of sociological study, and were mainstays of an earlier evolutionary anthropology. Of course, such organisations are to some degree constituted as collections of ‘replicators’ out of which they are composed, but the sum will always be more than the parts, and it is the viability of the whole organisation that is often selected for or against. So a basic question in regard to social evolution, as in regard to biological evolution, is what level of selection are we interested in, and this will depend on the questions one is asking.

Taking their cue from Maynard Smith and Szathmáry’s (1995) study of major macro-level transitions in biological evolution, Hodgson and Knudsen attempt to outline the same for social evolution in one of their last chapters (2010: ch 8). They conceptualise this as a series of pivotal shifts in which new major forms of ‘replicators’ and ‘interactors’ emerge, each altering and tending to accelerate the process of change. They see human society building new levels on top of the

original baseline of genetic evolution. In summary: First early forms of hominid culture based on the general capacity for social learning and embodied habits consolidate the formation of basic social groups ('bands'). Then language in the full sense arises, facilitating more complex learning and collective behaviour, and eventually more complex and hierarchicised forms of kinship-based social organisation. This would be during the period that archaeologists generally call the 'upper paleolithic', c.50,000-10,000 years ago. Then writing, associated with the coming of civilisations and archaic states, is the next great replication system to emerge. Next, also associated with, perhaps even diagnostic of, the formation of early states, are legal systems, which are able to encode, impose by force, and reproduce much more elaborate regulation of social behaviour, thus making these new larger forms of social and political organisation possible. Finally, they identify science and science-based technology as the last major emergent replicating system, which like law, creates a relatively stable and expanding body of knowledge, although in this case, about the natural world rather than moral injunction. They also note that this last system has an elective affinity with more open, democratic, and commercial forms of social organisation. Throughout this account they tend to characterise these levels as transformations of the complexity of information and its communication, thus accenting the role of new forms of replicators, or better, replicating systems (i.e., habit, language, writing, law, science), in this long-term process. But as I've indicated in this brief summary, although they leave it somewhat in the background, theirs is also a summary of emerging forms of interactors, namely, dominant forms of social organisation, from small bands, to complex kinship structures, to archaic and modern states, with subsidiary forms of organisation developing and

proliferating within these. As they observe, the more complex forms of social organisation, that seem to be the affordances of innovative replication systems, significantly increase in social power. They remark in regard to the emergence of more complex kin-based social forms following on from the emergence of language that:

Hierarchical societies with differentiated social positions probably outcompeted their less complex rivals for several reasons. The more complex division of labor led to enhanced skill formation and greater productivity in the provision of food and other basic needs. It also led to more effective warrior groups. Rivals could be defeated as long as these advantages were not negated by the disadvantages of a more ossified social structure. Some degree of hierarchy provided advantages in terms of coordination and cohesion (2010: 194).

I am in full agreement. This is a succinct statement of the entwined relationship between power-to and power-over. However, they schematically represent language ('the replicator') as coming first, yielding the emergence of more complex social structures ('the interactor'). But theorists of language origins are inclined to argue the close interaction of the development of language and sociality, each being a condition stimulating the other. So again, a certain implicit prioritisation of replicators over interactors may be misleading here.

Having presented my general take on, and reservations about, current social evolutionary theory, I now turn to an example comparative historical sociology, and make a case for thinking about long-term human history in social evolutionary terms.



## **Power To/Over and Human History**

From here on I want to relate what has been said to the broad sweep of human history, understood as the long and vast development of human social power. It makes sense to start with the most imposing contemporary effort to do this, Michael Mann's four-volume *Sources of Social Power* (1986, 1993, 2012, 2013). This makes sense particularly because Mann makes the argument in volume one of *Sources* that his story largely begins where 'general social evolution' ends and history begins. I can perhaps clarify my position by explaining why I disagree. As Mann puts it:

So, in this chapter [2 of volume 1] I set the scene for a later *history* of power. It will always be a history of particular places, for that has been the nature of the development of power. The general capacities of human beings faced with their earthly environment gave rise to the first societies—to agriculture, the village, the clan, the lineage, the chiefdom—but not to civilization, stratification or the state. Our thanks, or curses, for that are due to more particular historical circumstances (1986: 40, emphasis in original).

In this way Mann argues that the idea of evolution is applicable to early human history, before the full arrival of the state, because the developments enumerated in the quote, agriculture etc., all reflect general, even universal human tendencies, which were likely to, and did arise in various separate contexts. But the state, with its capacity to 'cage' people and lock them into its systems of stratification, is not a result of general tendencies, but rather unique

contingent events that occurred in a particular way, arising first in Mesopotamia, and then spreading outward, in a ramifying but particularistic path.

I have various problems with this narrative. First and quite simply, the existence of pre-Columbian New World states such as those of the Maya, Aztec and the Inca implies the 'independent invention' of 'civilisation', 'stratification' and 'the state'. In other words, that this path of development might be more general and less particular than Mann implies. Elsewhere Mann (Ibid.: 74) suggests that even if we acknowledge the Mesoamerican cases, there are still too few cases of the independent development of civilization to treat it as anything other than particularistic. I am not convinced. Second, there is at least a hint in Mann's thesis that the caging and stratifying effects of civilization are 'historical' and 'particular' in the sense of not a necessary part of human nature. That which is accidental can in theory at least, be undone, or avoided in the future. In other words, the shift from 'evolution' to 'history' might be construed as providing a narrative of movement, to put it figuratively, from a 'state of nature' to a more 'fallen' condition of power-tainted historical beings. I am not saying that this is what Mann intends, but the notion of a temporal boundary, with different rules of social change on either side, seems almost metaphysical. Finally and most fundamentally, I question the idea that evolution concerns the 'general' and history the 'particular'. This strikes me as a misleading distinction. Evolution tries to define some general parameters within which particular processes take place. But unique, particularistic events, that send evolutionary developments along a particular path, are an integral part of the theory. From random but advantageous mutations on up to the meteor strike that supposedly triggered

the KT boundary mass extinctions, unique events are involved. Within Mann's own discussion, I see no reason to categorise the various independent discoveries of agricultural practices as examples of 'general evolution', but the independent developments of state formation as examples of 'particular history'. Both happened more than once, independently, but were also of such significance that they tended to spread along direct causal pathways, as outcomes of those relatively unique events. Evolutionary theory tells us that environmental adaptation will be a key factor in the persistence or disappearance of forms in specific contexts. It does not require parallel, directional movement towards similar ends, and where this does happen it is attributed to similar conditions. Indeed the wider tendency of evolution is toward diversification and differentiation, towards increasing particularity as variants adapt to environments. There is no overarching narrative, merely a logical train of causation that can be reconstructed after the fact. Considering this from the 'history end', Mann's approach to history, as with all comparative and historical sociologists, is not defined by its particularism, but precisely by its effort to identify broad over-arching patterns and rules of thumb—to find the general in the particular. For instance, Mann's idea of 'interstitial emergence' (1986: 16), that social actors will form novel social networks and institutions in the spaces between dominant ones, in ways that are sometimes transformative for wider society, looks very much like an evolutionary hypothesis to me. The distance between comparative history and social evolution is not as far as he suggests it is. Evolutionary theory explains order amid contingency and particularity—not in opposition to these<sup>vii</sup>.

Returning to the question of power to/over, I will first sketch its relevance for our conceptualization of two great transitions in human history, the Neolithic and Industrial 'Revolutions', before examining more closely its significance for the social organisation of modern, capitalist, democratic, liberal society. This will include some speculations on the tendency of a certain social form, 'competition', to be selected for in this kind of society.

The Neolithic Revolution involved the combined processes of creating horticulture (simple, low technology agriculture) beyond incipient forms, such that new and larger sedentary village settlements could be maintained year-round. Whereas previously populations had relied for subsistence on foraging and hunting, these now became secondary in these populations. This process was of course not as sudden as the term 'revolution' makes it sound, but the ultimate implications of this change were profound. It led not only to larger and denser settlements with more permanent structures, but increasing manufacture of tools and other items for daily use, no longer limited by a need for regular portability characteristic of small, mobile foraging groups. It also created the initial basis for the growth of trade and commerce between groups as these commanded different local resources. This in turn seems to have helped stimulate differentiation and specialization within the community as a more diverse repertoire of tasks and roles was needed. It also appears that with growing populations and numbers of settlements creating greater pressures on land and resources, that this form of social organisation under some circumstances led to the development of early forms of feuding and 'warfare' between groups. Politically, this shift corresponds to an increasing role for

community leaders involved in mobilizing activity and resources, particularly during times of stress. While typically such leaders lacked any coercive means, and operated largely through reputation and exhortation, they nonetheless indicate a certain formalisation of the need for communal coordination.

Eventually this shift provided the basic conditions for the rise in some cases of more concentrated power in the form of privileged hereditary lineages that monopolised access to community leadership ('chiefdoms'), and hierarchies of rulership spanning multiple settlements. And these in turn would provide the platform for the rise of early states underwritten by more extensive and intensive forms agriculture and legitimated by theistic cosmologies (Mann's 'civilisation'). Although it was long and contingent process of several millennia, the initial 'neolithic revolution' of about 10,000 years ago eventually supplied conditions for the rise of the first complex, state-based societies about 5,000 years ago.

The question has often been asked: why on Earth would people so free ever submit to the complex hierarchies of civilization? (e.g. Wenke and Olszewski 2007: 279). In the first place, many of these changes probably happened so gradually, over many generations, that people were not aware of how much things were changing. But it is also the case that the archaeological and historical records indicate cases of people 'refusing the offer', of complex systems falling apart, and sometimes not just through systemic collapse, but also active revolt<sup>viii</sup>. Although larger complex systems do eventually tend to 'cage' populations in Mann's apt term, in other words, it becomes very difficult to 'turn back', there is no unidirectional 'ratchet'. But it seems inadequate to try to

understand this process strictly in terms of the loss of freedom, in terms of the subordination of peoples to hierarchies. To view these changes through this lens is, in a sense anachronistic. It imposes a certain modern, Enlightenment based preference for and conception of 'freedom' on the past. It seems entirely possible that as these processes were going on, people were aware of the complex trade-offs they were involved in. They could see that the concentration of power above their heads was linked to the expansion of powers enjoyed by the average community member. Greater food resources, more varied built environments, more diverse social roles and opportunities, larger social fields from which to seek friendships, allies, and companions, defense against predation by other human groups, and many other abilities and opportunities came along with the growing complexity and hierarchy. It is with some condescension that we assume that our ancestors were not actively weighing the pros and cons of greater power-to linked to greater power-over, however limited their understanding of, and control over, the long-term trends of social evolution. As I've suggested, there was no one historical moment of decision to accept such changes, but rather a long and fitful general shift in this direction.

Let us jump ahead to the 'industrial revolution'. Again, this term conceptually isolates a process that emerges out of accumulating preconditions: advances in agriculture, navigation and shipbuilding, growing global trade, the expansion of communication and science through printing and literacy. However, a narrow definition from Nolan and Lenski is serviceable:

...the period during which the productive activities of societies were rapidly transformed by the invention of a succession of machines

powered by newer, inanimate sources of energy, such as coal, electricity, petroleum, and natural gas (2006: 193).

As we know the initial shift in this direction (c. 1760-1830) has been followed by subsequent waves of innovations in technologies, energy capture, and communications. The story of how this more material change corresponded to concurrent changes in political organisation is of course highly complex (cf. Spruyt 1994). The initial path of cutting-edge change was strongly associated with the rise of capitalism in Britain, and the expansion of the British Empire, the dominant core of this process eventually passing on to the United States and its informal empire (to use Mann's term, 2013: 86-87). And we should remember that innovation in industrial forms of production happened throughout the complex colonial system, for instance in the Caribbean (e.g. Mintz 1986), not just in the British mainland. In Prussia and the German lands, and later in Russia after the 1917 revolution, industrialisation was more driven from the top down in areas responding to the expansion of this capitalist power. Here I limit my observations more to the first variant, which I would argue is ultimately the dominant trend, at least so far. It is striking that the rise of agrarian and later industrial capitalism was accompanied by an ideological discourse that rejected the traditional rule by aristocratic strata based on inherited feudal structures, and championed the emancipation of the people and their right to self rule. How they would rule themselves, and that this would ultimately become institutionalized through democracy, was not readily apparent in the early days. Of course this was a complex process with many contrary trends: conservatism, socialism, communism, atheism versus religion, individualism versus

collectivism, and so on. My main point however is that there was a powerful rhetorical trope in the political discourse, of rejecting and overcoming the power-over of the past, and releasing the potential for power-to among both individuals and societies. This Enlightenment idea, the now tarnished promise of modernity, still frames much of our thinking.

Things are never so simple of course. We know that the vast increase in our material powers, embodied in consumer choices and the technological expansion of our capacities for action has been accompanied by a massive increase in centralized powers, of states, and other large and dominant forms of organisation, most notably the modern corporation with transnational reach in its operations (Gomory and Sylla 2013; Micklethwaite and Woolridge 2005). As ever, the expansion of our power-to is linked to the expansion of power-over. And we are deeply culturally committed to this link. Few would want to see a decline in their personal powers to consume, indeed modern state legitimacy is generally premised on the ability to constantly deliver and expand this through economic growth (cf. Hall 2013: 247-5). And few would choose to live in a state with weaker powers overall, even despite objections, from both right and left, to the ever-expanding infrastructural powers of the modern state to monitor, regulate, expropriate and command its citizens. As contradictory as it is, the characteristic dream of the age is to be an empowered and autonomous individual, living within a powerful state that can protect our interests, while as free as possible from the intrusions of power from above. This is the paradoxical promise of liberal rule.



My basic point here is that these two great transformations of human social relations, these two ‘revolutions’, can be effectively summarized as twinned expansions of power-to and power-over. Whatever the twists and turns of specific history, they suggest a long-term bias in this direction, toward the intensification of power to/over. It is in this context that we need to understand liberal forms of society. Not simply as the epiphenomenal response to material and technological changes, nor as a superstructure of ideas and practices resting atop a capitalist economy, but as a form of social organisation, a way of legitimating predominant power relations, that is also constitutive of those power arrangements. The ‘paradox of liberal rule’ isn’t necessarily a lie. The liberal democratic regimes that accompany liberal forms of society achieve greater power-to, precisely by loosening the grip of the state’s power-over to a degree, allowing greater scope for autonomous organisation and action within the economy and civil society. Precisely by releasing power within limits, governed by laws, they stimulate the inventive, productive and competitive activities that give liberal society its characteristic dynamic of innovation. Meanwhile the dispersion of power rebounds on the system as a whole, returning power to the centre. In simple economic terms, the generation of private wealth provides the tax base that supports a powerful state. But this is only one dimension. By allowing greater freedom of thought and public discourse, the available universe of ideas and discursive strategies is also expanded and made available to the wider system and the state. By allowing a degree of cultural and political pluralism, the system overall is strengthened (see Hearn 2011 for some elaboration). Now this is a social evolutionary hypothesis, there is no ‘whig interpretation of history’ here (Butterfield 1978). My claim is

not that 'liberty will out' in its long march through history, but rather that those systems that can deliver this reinforcing circuit of power-to and power-over will have an advantage, and will tend to displace those that don't. The often-remarked trend toward democracy in our times (Dahl 2000, Dunn 2006) is not a triumph of virtue or reason, but an outcome of the evolutionary logic of power to/over. We may indeed prefer to live in some variant of liberal society, but such values are not in any simple sense the causes of the rise of this kind of society—to think so would be hubris. There is no guarantee from either evolution or history that this sociopolitical form of society will maintain its advantage in the future. As the context and environment changes, so will the determinants of advantage.

Having also argued above that macro-scale developments in the evolutions of societies are in fact aggregate effects of smaller scale selection processes among social forms, let me briefly elaborate one such example of a social form that has been in key ingredient in this larger rise of the liberal form of society. I focus on 'competition' both as an idea, and as a highly ritualized institution<sup>ix</sup>. By competition in this context I do not mean the general condition of struggle over limited goods and resources, found both in the natural world of biological evolution, and throughout human history. More specifically, I mean the deliberate and artificial organisation of activity in highly formalized ways so as to bring actors into a contest over limited goods, both material and symbolic, and achieve an outcome of the allocation of those goods. This is a pervasive form in liberal societies. The market is ambiguously understood as both a natural manifestation and a legally constituted arena of regulated competition in which

the market, as a mechanism of justice, allocates rewards to the successful. The modern democratic political system, only dimly foreseen in eighteenth century, has become stabilised and institutionalised through the establishments of competitive party systems and routinised election procedures that allocate access to governmental power. Popular culture, through sports and other forms of entertainment, has elaborated competition into a highly stylised form of expression, at once diverting spectacle and dramatic distillation of the wider society. Lest we regard ourselves as 'social scientists' as aloof from the grubby world of competition, we should remember the competitive workings of funding calls and promotion rounds on the one hand, and the fact that our intellectual activity is largely a formalised competition among ideas (cf. Hull 1988).

On the one hand competition permeates social life in liberal society as an idea and ideal, as a broad governing principle. Even those of us who have reservations about too much economic competition 'red in tooth and claw', would probably prefer more robust competition amongst political views in public discourse, and would want to maintain real and vibrant competition in the democratic arena. On the other hand, this idea beds down as ritual. We don't have to *think* it all the time because we are, by routine, *doing* it so much of the time. Here I intend to invoke the anthropological tradition of theorising about ritual, and to suggest that competition in its more stylised forms exhibits many of the classic features of ritual: (1) to be legitimate certain rules and procedures must be observed and followed; (2) the performance of the ritual alters the status of the key participants, i.e. transforms them into 'winners' and 'losers'; (3)

the competitive ritual is often performed for a wider audience, in the process dramatizing and validating core values of the society (Hearn 2014).

More than this, competition is central to the legitimation of liberal society (Hearn 2011). Such societies evince a deep ambivalence about power, maximizing the desire for individual liberty and autonomy, and being suspicious of all claims to rule from above. But as I have suggested, they are in fact premised on the complex interdependence of increased powers to and over, at all levels.

Ritualised competition has the capacity to allocate social goods, while often appearing to do this in a 'natural' way without deferring to some arbitrary power. Thus it can legitimise outcomes and allocations of power, in the act, while appearing to stand outside the power hierarchies of formal authority. It is ideally suited to the legitimation of power in a form of society that distrusts power (as much as it inevitably needs it).

Finally, I come back to the evolutionary argument. The social form of competition has become increasingly ramified and ritualised in liberal forms of society since the eighteenth century precisely because it is selected for, because it serves the functional needs of that kind of society for a mechanism that legitimately allocates goods while also sustaining the creative dynamism of the society, and not appearing to endorse any power merely on the grounds of tradition. What emerges in this period is what I call 'reflexive competition', that is, competition not simply as an observable fact or description of social interaction, but as an explicitly formulated idea that can be, and is, harnessed and put to use. Competition as a value and strategy. The two great intellectual moments in the formulation of this new, reflexive concept of competition were

Adam Smith's treatment of the emerging market economy, and Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Accordingly both these ideas have fed social theorisations and popular discourses far beyond their original domains of application in economics and biological evolution, precisely because they have proven so powerful, and, in a word, applicable.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that human social evolution has involved a dialectical increase in our powers –to and –over. I have also suggested that contemporary liberal society needs to be understood as a particularly successful 'strategy' for maximizing this dialectic. But I would conclude by emphasising that the language of human emancipation and natural liberty that liberal societies have inherited from the Enlightenment has also disabled us for the analysis of the form of society we live in. We tend to conceptualise power in negative terms as tyrannical or despotic rule, because our characteristic ideas about power were formulated as parts of critiques of older systems of aristocratic rule that were increasingly seen as illegitimate. When we want to talk and theorise about how power works in the liberal societies we find ourselves in, there is a predisposition to think of power as a cryptic and thus illegitimate form of domination. Our class habitus which is too naturalised for us to fully perceive keeps us in our places (Bourdieu 1990). The production and projection of knowledge inevitably molds our subjectivities making us believe that which we might otherwise question (Foucault 2000: 326-48). The deepest, 'third dimension' of power shapes our very wants and preferences in ways that are conducive to given regimes of power (Lukes 1974). I am not entirely rejecting

these formulations as more subtle ways of understanding the workings of ideology. But I am questioning their overall adequacy, and suggesting that even if offered by the theorists in question as one part of the power puzzle, they tend to get picked up and emphasised more generally precisely because they reinforce an attitude of suspicion towards power that we are most comfortable with. My broader aim in this article is to work toward a less suspicious and more pragmatic attitude towards power in liberal society, one that recognizes it as an outcome of a long train of social evolution, in which power is never overcome, but only deepened, increased, and ramified.

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<sup>i</sup> A couple of general indications of this: (1) The tradition of theorizing elite power that runs from Pareto, Mosca and Michels up to figures such as G. William Domhoff (1983) is often marginalized in the power theory literature. I think the blunt acceptance that there are such things as elites often makes us uneasy. (2) The work of Foucault (2000) often vaguely describes power as a pervasive, un-centred and relational, resisting grappling with its hierarchical patterns, but is accompanied by a notion of 'local knowledges' struggling to break free of 'dominant discourses' in ways that sentimentally echo Enlightenment ideas of emancipation.

<sup>ii</sup> From here on I will use the hyphen to distinguish these two sub-concepts, and the oblique to highlight when I want to indicate both senses in tandem. I want to avoid a proliferation of inverted commas.

<sup>iii</sup> Even personality types, in the Weberian sense of *Menschen* might be considered social forms in this sense (see Darmon 2011).

<sup>iv</sup> Progress however, is not the same as a trend, or directionality (see Blute 2010: ch 8). Here biological evolutionary theory is more ambivalent, and so must social evolutionary theory be. All evidence points to the fact that life began in simple environmentally constrained forms, and gradually increased in complexity and ability to spread across diverse environments. This suggests a macro-level directionality to biological evolution. But once the initial colonization of the Earth by life had happened, the number of species has risen and fallen without a clear trend (although subject to other causal processes, e.g. those leading to mass extinctions). Similarly, complexity can be difficult to define, but the morphological-functional complexity of species is often known to reduce depending on conditions (e.g. eyes 'atrophy' in lightless cave environments). Within particular species and sets of species, sometimes particular sets of environmental conditions tend to promote morphological changes in one direction over a period of time (e.g. increase in body size), but this kind of directionality is specific to the species-environment relationships in question, not a general evolutionary rule. Very often variations within a given species accumulate over time randomly, without any clear trend. The example of biological evolution suggests caution is needed when proposing overall trends for social evolution. Nonetheless, there do appear to be some large if non-

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linear trends in human history: the increasing numbers of the global population; the expansion into more diverse environments; the growth in scale of social organization and political centralisation; the concentration of people in ever larger cities; the expansion and acceleration of communicative capacities; the increased harnessing and exploitation of extra-somatic energy sources. As with directional change within species, there is a question at least posed here about whether certain conditions are driving these trends.

<sup>v</sup> Blute (2010: ch 6) takes a pragmatic view of the meme concept: ‘memes if useful—but not necessarily memes’ (ibid.:20). Hodgson and Knudsen (2010: 132-36), are much more critical, arguing that it relies on imprecise notions of ‘information’ and ‘ideas’.

<sup>vi</sup> Whether this is a sufficient definition of culture is debatable (see Hearn 2011: 203).

<sup>vii</sup> For a somewhat similar critical response to Randall Collins’s rejection of evolutionism, see Sanderson’s comments in Collins (2009: 269-272).

<sup>viii</sup> For instance, the burning and destruction of temples and elite residences in Teotihuacan in the Valley of Mexico around 650 AD, followed by the dispersion of much of the population back into rural areas (Cowgill 1997: 156-57).

<sup>ix</sup> Competition is the theme of my current mid-career fellowship funded by the *Independent Social Research Foundation*, entitled ‘The Transformation of Competition: A Study in the Formation of Modernity and Liberal Societies’ (see Hearn 2012: 147-50).

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